

A proposed new species of munia, genus *Lonchura* (Estrildinae)

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There are 39 currently known species that comprise the genus *Lonchura*, accepting *Lemuresthes*, *Heteromunia* and *Padda* as subgenera. This total becomes 40 if one accepts the opinion of Sibley & Monroe (1990) that *L. nigriceps* is not conspecific with *L. bicolor*. Of these, 32 are to be found in Asia. From 1989 to 1995, I lived in Hong Kong and travelled extensively throughout the region in search of munias to observe and study, both in the field and in captivity. In this way I came across several new forms. Some were eventually dismissed as probable hybrids, produced by bird keepers in Europe and imported to Jakarta along with stocks of domesticated Australian estrildines and canaries. Some were described as new subspecies (Restall 1995a). One, the subject of this paper, is described here as a new species:

Lonchura pallidiventer sp. nov.

Holotype. Adult, AMNH 831287, collected by the author in Jakarta, apparently from south-east Kalimantan, Indonesia, 1992.

Syntype. Young adult (incomplete moult from juvenile plumage), AMNH 8311288, similarly acquired.

Description. A rich brown medium-sized munia with a cream belly, white-spotted black flanks, and golden uppertail-coverts.

The adult is 110–120 mm in length; wing-length 53–58 mm. The crown, nape and sides of the head are raw umber or cinnamon. The mantle and wings are Prout's brown (121A in Smithe 1975), the wing-coverts and flight feathers edged with amber. The rump is orange-rufous changing to straw on the uppertail-coverts. The tail is Prout's brown, the feathers edged with straw. The face, forehead, lores, base of mesial and bib are olive-brown. The breast is rich chestnut. When the bird is in calm repose the chestnut breast seems like a clear, well defined cushion, much as it does on the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin *L. castaneothorax*. The flanks, joining in a poorly-defined bar across the breast, are black, with white spots and scallops. The inner flanks, hidden or mostly hidden by the closed wings, are chestnut. The thighs are barred with black and chestnut or black and cream. The underwing-coverts are cream. The belly, ventral region and undertail-coverts are cream. There may be black sub-terminal crescents on the undertail-coverts. The irides are dark brown. The bill is pale violaceous grey. The legs and feet are grey.

Males have a few grizzled lines, produced by black feather edgings, on the upper part of the cream belly, reduced or absent in the female. Females have slight pale barring on the lower rump. The colour plate also shows a difference in the inner flank spotting but this could be coincidental. Males tend to be larger, but not consistently so.

The juvenile is probably similar to the young of other typical munias. The only individual I have seen is a bird that was well advanced in moult into its first adult plumage and I have painted the juvenile based on this. This bird appears to be ground cinnamon to light drab above, a pale pinkish buff on the lower face, throat and breast, and pale buff for the rest of the underparts.

Distribution. From statements of an international bird dealer in Jakarta, and a trader in the Jakarta bird market, it seems that the birds come from somewhere in the hinterland of Banjarmasin in southeast Kalimantan, Borneo.

Origins of the birds under discussion. I first saw one of these birds in Singapore. It was a single specimen in the collection of Mr Patrick Tay, a businessman who owns a parrot farm and has an interest in munias. He had received the bird in a shipment from Jakarta. A year later, I discovered five individuals in a cage at Wida's Bird Farm in Jakarta. They had been reserved by the owner, Mr Sani Susanto, for his private collection. As he had not seen them before, he would not part with even one. Mr Susanto said they had very definitely come from southeast Kalimantan and had been shipped from Banjarmasin. I also examined some Dusky Munias *L. fuscans* he had received in the same shipment. This was in February 1990. In May I was able to return and brought with me the colour sketches I had made based on notes taken previously, which I then corrected with live birds in the hand (Plate 1). Two of the birds were distinctly larger and bolder than the remaining three and I had painted one of these with one of the smaller birds. This larger bird was a richer chestnut and had plain cream undertail-coverts.

On that visit I was able to obtain two birds that a friend had bought for me in the Jakarta bird market a couple of weeks earlier. The trader was well known to us. He said he had bought them from a man who lived in Banjarmasin and who regularly brought wild birds to sell for pocket money whenever he came over on the boat to Jakarta to visit his family. The two birds were virtually identical. At first I kept them with some White-bellied Munias *L. leucogastra smythiesi*, for comparative purposes, thinking they might be an undescribed subspecies of the White-bellied Munia. In this regard they quickly showed themselves to be quite different in appearance, posture, voice and behaviour. In posture they tend to sit upright, rather than across the perch as White-bellied Munias do. They proved to be females.

In October 1990, a juvenile in emaciated condition, which died within two days, was taken from another of the hand-carried lots from Banjarmasin. Then in April 1991, two more birds turned up in the Jakarta bird market, once again brought by the visitor from Banjarmasin. These turned out to be two males, were in excellent condition and were singing well. Another turned up the following year.



Figure 1. Advertisement song. The bird may bob up and down while bent over like this.

This makes a total of 13 birds of this species that I saw over a period of four years. The surviving three birds in my possession were donated to the Zoological Society of San Diego, and are currently the subject of further study by Dr Baptista of the California Academy of Sciences.

Calls. The contact note, when the birds are together, is *pip* or *chip*, and there are variations of tone from both sexes. The alarm call is a loud *tchek!* When nervous or apprehensive, such as when I am seen watching them through the window, the sentry bird (Restall 1995b) will utter a rapid *tik tik tik tik*, accompanied by tail jerking from side to side and very quick wing-flicking. The male, when calling its mate, utters a *pee*, *peet* or *cheet*, the female's reply is a *pip* or *chip*.

Song and display. In undirected advertisement song (Fig. 1) the male stands at about 45 degrees to the perch, head horizontal, and sings at first a quiet *tik tik tik tik tik tik tik* which changes to more of a *tuk tuk tuk tuk*. This becomes a few long *weeee* whistles, each tending to descend, changes to a long drawn out *weeeeeeeeeeeeeeee* legato (or long connecting note) first rising then descending, and ends with several *wee wee wee* notes. The whole may last from 8 to 15 seconds and may be repeated many times. The legato is sometimes loud and penetrating and may be the only part of the song heard even a short distance away.

When displaying to the female the male is slightly more hunched, with the bill pointing slightly downwards. The nape, bib and upper throat feathers are erected, but the chest feathers are depressed. The rump is ruffled. The flanks and belly feathers are fully erected, clearly displaying the white spots on the black. In high intensity display (Fig.



Figure 2. High intensity, directed song when a female is near by.

2) the bird stands well clear of the perch, with neck stretched and head almost horizontal, moving from side to side as necessary to follow the female. During the performance the bill is opened wide and half closed in regular movements.

I have seen the male take a length of grass, holding it at one end, and jerk his head upwards a couple of times (Fig. 3). On this occasion the female approached but he dropped it and no display followed. On another occasion when a very active nest-building male saw his mate near by he flew to her with a length of paper in his bill and went immediately into display song, dropping the paper as he opened his bill.

There appears to be little loss of the complete straw display as detailed by Baptista & Horblit (1990). The display begins with straw carrying followed by the head jerk, and tail twist. In the absence of any straw carrying, the hunch is perhaps the equivalent of the introductory bow. The inverted curtsy (Morris 1958) is minimal but not completely absent, and the song ends with a bow. I have not seen the tail spread, but the full fluffing of the rump is probably the equivalent.

English name. I suggest Cream-bellied Munia.

Discussion

Considering the apparent origin of the birds, I compared them rather carefully with the White-bellied Munia *L. leucogaster*, which is the only munia in Kalimantan that is in any way similar. This I was able to do very well as I had four *L. leucogaster smythiesi* in the laboratory at the time. The significant differences in appearance are the total lack of any



Figure 3. Straw carrying, before singing. The male will bob up and down while carrying the straw.

striations on the upper surfaces, rich orange lower rump and uppertail-coverts of the new taxon, and the pure cream of the belly and undertail-coverts which is unlike any other munia. In contrast the White-bellied Munia has striated upper parts, a white to pale cream belly, and fuscous or black undertail-coverts.

The presence of the long drawn-out legato in the song structure places it probably within the *Munia* subgenus (which includes the Chestnut Munia *L. atricapilla* and the Great-billed Mannikin *L. grandis*). To my ear, the song is similar in structure to that of the Five-coloured Munia *L. quinticolor*.

From a considerable experience with munias over some 40 years, studying them in field, aviary and laboratory, I have attempted to explain this taxon by hypothesising possible combinations of parentage

that might produce a hybrid with the plumage characteristics displayed, but have failed to come up with one, however improbable. The juvenile, albeit in moult, failed to show any of the scalloping on the underparts typical of most munia hybrids. I have also scoured the avicultural press for photographs of munia hybrids, and have been unable to find any reference to a similar form. From the song, display and coloration of these birds, including the all-pale bill, I am inclined to align it with *L. quinticolor* and *L. castaneothorax*.

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